



January 2010

Physical Therapy Benefits Frozen Shoulder



Much more common in women than men, frozen shoulder typically affects those in the 40- to 60-year age range. About 3% of the general population and 20% of those with diabetes suffer from this puzzling condition. Its technical name, **adhesive capsulitis**, comes from the area affected (the shoulder's joint capsule), and the fact that shrinkage and/or inflammation lead to scarring, which causes a "sticking" or adhesion of the tissue within.

The benefits of physical therapy vary according to the stage of frozen shoulder you experience. **Stage 1, the "freezing phase,"** during which the shoulder becomes increasingly painful and stiff, typically lasts from a few weeks to eight months. The shoulder is **resistant to aggressive physical therapy or pain reduction** and is very difficult to treat. When possible, passive or assisted range-of-motion exercises can help prevent loss of movement, and various pain-reducing methods can sometimes help. Some research indicates that anything beyond minimal treatment during the "freezing phase" could impede long-term success.

In **Stage 2, the "frozen or stiffening phase,"** treatment may become more effective. This phase usually lasts up to 12 months. **Although the shoulder is still very stiff, physical therapy can become more active as pain recedes.** To achieve this, a nerve block administered by an anesthesiologist can be effective, as can more conservative medications. The goal is to retain and regain as much motion as possible.

Therapy can be more aggressive and is better tolerated for **Stage 3, the "thawing or recovery phase,"** which can last up to 24 months. Sometimes, arthroscopic surgery, in which specific tight sections of the shoulder capsule are cut to "release" them, is recommended and helpful, but often frozen shoulder resolves fairly well without it.

If you experience frozen shoulder, schedule an appointment with us. We can assess the stage of the condition and devise a specific treatment program to get you back to full range of motion as quickly and completely as possible.